

A Comparison of Health Information Needs between Patients at a Suburban Hospital-based Clinic and two Underserved Inner City Clinics

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Abstract

A needs assessment was conducted and the results were analyzed to determine and compare the health information seeking habits and needs of outpatients at a suburban hospital-based clinic and at two clinics located in underserved areas of the inner city.

Introduction

Despite the growth in the use of the Internet to access health related information, underserved populations are being excluded from the Information Revolution. A digital divide exists along ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, geographic and other demographic lines. Based on this premise the Medical College of Wisconsin Office of Clinical Informatics and Libraries applied for and received funding from the National Library of Medicine for a proposal called ClinicLink. A major goal of the project is to teach underserved populations how to access quality health information on the Internet. The first step in the project, a needs assessment, was conducted to determine and compare the health information seeking habits and needs of outpatients at a suburban hospital-based clinic (Froedtert Internal Medicine West Clinic) and at two clinics located in underserved areas of the inner city (Family House Clinic and Lisbon Avenue Health Center). According to the clinic statistics, 80% of the patients at the hospital-based clinic are white/non-hispanic; 14% are African American and 6% are other; 60% have private insurance; 27% are covered by Medicare and 3% are covered by Medicaid or other government funding. At the inner city clinics, 97% are African American; about 40% have no insurance; 21% use Medicaid as insurance; and 11% receive their health care through Medicare. The inner city clinic data indicates that the respondents from "underserved" area have less access to health care.

Methods

A printed survey was distributed at the clinics to determine: where consumers find health information; what sources of health information do they trust; and what medical topics they look for or are most interested in learning about.

To find out what health or medical topics clients would be most interested in, respondents were asked to circle any of the health topics listed on the survey form. The topic list was created in part by studying MedlinePlus Health Topics and other media sources.

Results

Hospital-based clinic patients returned 60 surveys and 56 were returned from the inner city clinics. The majority of patients in both settings utilize health care professionals for health-related information. Inner city patients were less likely to use the Internet or newspapers as an information resource (see table below).

Health Information Sources	Hospital-based N = 60	Inner city clinic N = 56	Chi-Square
Health care professional	85%	79%	NS
Internet	65%	23%	p < .01
Newspaper	58%	34%	p < .05
Television	35%	34%	NS

Patients in the hospital-based clinic were mostly interested in wellness topics such as fitness/weight management (60%), nutrition/food (47%), blood pressure (45%), vitamins/herbs (43%), and wellness/lifestyle (43%), while inner city patients sought information regarding illness including allergies/asthma, pain/pain relief (45%), blood pressure (43%), diabetes (39%), and skin/dermatology (38%).

Almost all hospital-based and inner city patients had great trust in their physician and educational institutions as a source of information. Over 90% of both patient groups trusted government sources of information. Patients at inner city clinics place more trust in media sources (92%) and pharmaceutical companies (85%) than hospital-based patients (84% and 71%). Also, more inner city patients place trust in commercial sources (advertisements) (67%) than hospital-based patients (45%).

Conclusions

Both populations surveyed rely heavily on and trust health professionals for health information. Inner city patients are more likely to place trust in potentially biased sources of information. Not surprisingly, the underserved population is the least likely to have found health information on the Internet. Development of a clinic based information portal and on-site training classes for patients may improve their access and appropriate utilization of Internet resources.